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MODERN BELIEF ABOUT JESUS

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At a very early date Jesus was given a position in the reverence and worship of his followers nearly identical with that of God. This attitude was maintained almost constantly and universally by succeeding generations of believers, yet it is also true that no one scheme of christological doctrine can be said to have dominated theology from the beginning, and it is probably safe to assume that there has never existed, even at any given period, absolute uniformity of opinion about Jesus. Among the earliest Christians he was interpreted chiefly in terms of Jewish messianic expectations; but when the new religion passed over to Greek soil much emphasis came to be placed upon metaphysical speculation, the type of speculation varying as time advanced to suit ideas current in successive periods of Christian thought. During the course of Christianity's extension and development there has been the constant necessity of adjusting christological dogma to the new ideas of each new age.

It is not at all strange, therefore, that we should ask, What can we believe about Jesus today? An evaluation of him in terms of modern thought is inevitable. Many persons may still be satisfied with some form of traditional Christology, but there are others who feel compelled to adopt, in their treatment of religious problems, the methods of critical inquiry which they recognize as valid for other fields of study and a world-view which harmonizes with the data of modern knowledge. If Jesus is to have vital significance for their religion, interpretation of him must rest upon careful historical research regarding his career and be phrased in the language of present-day thought.

The motive of this effort to understand Jesus anew should not be misunderstood. An expression of doubt regarding the validity of the older view is sometimes looked upon as an attempt to dis-

parage Jesus; but, on the contrary, its real aim is to obtain a more adequate means of appreciating his worth. One may question whether the first interpreters' speculations about Jesus can lay any stronger claim to finality than can their cosmology, but the world has not lost its meaning because it has been newly interpreted—in fact, it has taken on a much larger meaning. If it is assumed that Jesus' chief significance lies in the speculative garments which his early followers cast about him then there is danger that he lose prestige; but if he is discovered to have had essential worth quite apart from their theology the attempt to estimate his significance from the standpoint of modern thinking is scarcely to be feared. Therefore we may freely question, What can one, who critically estimates the historicity of the sources and holds a modern scientific world-view, believe about Jesus?

We are sometimes asked to state exactly what historical study has fixed upon as the pure facts about the earthly Jesus. Can it tell us whether he was miraculously born, whether he was really God, whether his physical body was raised from the tomb, and other questions of a similar character? To answer candidly, the historian cannot give a final reply to inquiries of this sort. He can observe the place of these items in the early faith, the probable date of their appearance in the literature, and the special theological interest which they were made to serve, but he cannot produce a mathematical demonstration either for or against their validity. There are two main reasons why he cannot do so. In the first place, his earliest sources of information were not given literary form until a generation or more after the events, and so the narratives are liable to be colored by the pious fancy of the primitive age. Indeed, if first-hand documents from the Twelve were extant one would still need to question whether the vivid imaginations of the first believers and their early theological interests had not influenced their reports. In the second place, these problems are primarily speculative rather than historical; the question of the quality of the phenomena is involved, and it cannot be answered apart from some metaphysical theory. Nor is a type of historical study which is content with determining the content of primitive belief sufficient for our purpose. Much of the phraseology and

many of the thought-forms of primitive Christianity do not correspond to modern men's ideas of what constitutes the highest values in our world of thought, therefore they cannot supply the content of our belief about Jesus. This is not strange when we remember that modern scientific ideas, the evolutionary interpretation of the world, the comparative study of religions, and the present complex conditions of society must of necessity enter into the making of any vital type of modern religious thinking.

Perhaps the fundamental difficulty with much of the older interpretation is the extent and character of its emphasis upon the supernatural. Many now feel that this way of picturing God's relation to human life and history is too mechanical to give a religiously adequate estimate of Jesus. According to the newer world-view, unprecedented and seemingly extraordinary events in history need not be assigned to other-world causes in order to give them significance. This world is now far richer in reality than it was for the ancients. Then it was barren and narrow and could be enriched only from without, while for moderns the enrichment has come increasingly from within. In proportion as the conquest of the normal has enlarged, confidence in it has increased, and the need for the abnormal has gradually disappeared. This is no impoverishment of the spiritual possibilities of the universe, but it does mean the elimination of externalism, freakishness, and arbitrary intervention in the normal world-order. So it follows that in interpreting Jesus, the category of supernaturalism is felt by many to be an inadequate way of picturing his worth—not because he has lost significance but because the category has done so. This situation is seen more definitely, for example, in the use which has been made of certain terms to indicate the idea of his deity—terms which no longer fitly answer to the conception of deity even when they are used of God himself. To be sure, it was inevitable that primitive thought upon this subject should move in the realm of physical relations, employing such ideas as defiance of the course of nature, unlimited exercise of the powers of sense, and the like; but today more comprehensive and spiritual terms are needed to express the idea of God and his relation to men.

Historical study renders a more practical service for modern

needs when it seeks to discover the ground rather than the content of the first disciples' belief. On the one hand Jesus was for them the exalted heavenly Messiah worthy of the highest form of interpretation afforded by the ideas of the time; on the other he was a historical individual with whom they had had intimate personal association, the memory of which lay behind their later theological thinking. Grant that they were often uncritical in their thinking, that they often expounded their own ideas rather than his, concede the possibility that their story of his infancy was myth, and that their belief in his resurrection was illusory, yet a very powerful influence must have emanated from their contact with him in order to support their strong, bold type of interpretation, and to inspire the loyal quality of life which they exemplified.

It is beyond question that the resurrection faith, however attained, was a powerful factor in determining early ideas about the earthly Jesus; Jewish messianism doubtless also offered a rich store of interpretative material; and probably both of these things took precedence in the disciples' minds over any purely historical interest. Yet even in the tradition as it now stands it is perfectly clear that neither the anticipation of Jesus' resurrection nor a general belief in his messiahship had occupied a central place in his life of fellowship with his disciples. The earliest gospel tradition is explicit in stating that the predictions of his resurrection fell upon deaf ears; while their belief in his messiahship did not take form until near the close of his ministry, and even then it was a somewhat faltering hope which quickly vanished under the shadow of the cross. We are not to imagine that their memory of the historical Jesus was in any large measure at first linked with these interpretative ideas. That this fact can be seen in the present form of the tradition is all the more significant in view of the special needs for the framers of the tradition to show that the later faith in the risen and exalted Messiah was consonant with the disciples' actual recollections of Jesus. We may believe that the feature in his life which made the most abiding impression at the time was not any claim of his to official dignity, either for the present or for the future, but the strength of his own forceful personality; indeed it may be that we shall not go far astray if we

think of this as a very essential factor in the genesis of the resurrection faith as well as in stimulating the first Christians' messianic belief.

The success of the new religious movement was no doubt largely due to this force of Jesus' personality, expressed and perpetuated in the work of his disciples. Judas of Gamala, Barcochba, and even John the Baptist, seem to have had quite as many adherents to preserve their memory as did Jesus, and the circumstances which attended them were hardly more adverse than those through which he passed; yet their cause failed while his succeeded—a significant testimony to the vital impress his personality left upon his disciples. The exceptional manner in which he awakened the deeper elements of religious faith gave the new religion a stimulus through which it conquered even so stubborn a foe as Saul of Tarsus.

It is natural, therefore, to seek the basal element for present belief in a study of the real content of Jesus' life. In this way the perplexities of ecclesiastical dogma may be escaped without sacrificing the essential thing which inspired the creeds and yet sometimes eluded them. Failure to recognize that the personal religious life of Jesus lay at the basis of all genuine interpretation seems to have been the weakness of theologians from the beginning. While the first disciples were deeply impressed by their association with Jesus they were not content merely to tell the story of his life, they preferred to set in the foreground their own inferences about the meaning of his career; and eventually the efforts of later believers to account for the original force of his personality became entangled in grave logical difficulties regarding such problems as how he could be both truly God and truly man, or how he could be God by the side of God himself and yet Christians hold to belief in only one God. The creed makers' efforts to fix the content of belief by much definition of phrases may have answered the needs of their day, but modern interpretation must go behind the dogmas which have gathered about Jesus and at least take its starting-point from the actual content of his earthly life.

What was there about him that led his associates to esteem him as they did? It will be safer to set aside for the moment all accounts

of his alleged claims to official dignity and to look at the gospel picture of his everyday life and teaching, noting especially those items which seem to be preserved without any evidently apologetic intent. Many features of his career were too deeply impressed upon the disciples' minds to be eclipsed even by the new faith in the exalted Messiah whose earthly career counted for so little theologically in comparison with his present heavenly dignity. For example, in contrast with the tendency manifest in certain portions of the tradition to set him above the ordinary experiences of humanity, the gospels preserve a very life-like picture of the genuineness of his daily experiences; he grew weary with toil, he lacked worldly possessions, he was the victim of scheming enemies, and even his spiritual life needed the constant support of a prayerful appeal to God. Yet in this lowliness his followers felt the peculiar power of his unselfish solicitude for the welfare of others. Not only were they led to admire his ideal, but they were inspired to cultivate a similar type of life for themselves.

Again, in recalling the daily relation of master to disciple they show another phase of his unique influence upon them. It was natural enough for a teacher in those days to have a group of followers, yet the discipleship to which Jesus called men was distinctive. The incentive which he held out was not an appeal to their self-interest but an opportunity to serve others—by following him they were to become fishers of men. Their motives must be unselfish, they must aim to make absolute choice of God's will, and to realize for themselves a life of true sonship to God. They are to follow God as he did, and this ideal is best attained by becoming followers of him inasmuch as he has a peculiarly clear vision of the Father's will. Their memory of this ethical and spiritual sanity of their master probably stood the early Christians in good stead later, when the ecstatic side of the church's life threatened to become unduly prominent.

Similarly in the memory of Jesus' work as teacher they find him unique. His hearers were often astonished at his direct expression of personal conviction in contrast with the usual method of referring to Rabbi So-and-so. He criticized current interpretations of the law and also passed judgment upon certain things

in the law itself: some of its requirements were too lax and some were too severe. In the content of his message in general, there is the same impression of superiority due to his keen spiritual insight. He shocked contemporary religious teachers by announcing the forgiveness of sins on conditions very different from those then generally recognized as valid, he simplified the problem of salvation by making a life of spiritual fellowship with God fundamental, and he fixed and at the same time elevated all ideals of human conduct by setting up as the supreme test the quality of godlikeness.

In all this the disciples must have felt that Jesus' superiority rested upon the force of his own character. They do not represent him as a mere automaton mechanically uttering the divine oracles, nor was his message what might be called a mere product of his intellectualism, but it had been wrought out in his own spiritual experience and clarified by his sense of constant fellowship with God. They also remembered that he wished them to cultivate a genuine heart-life. He addressed himself to their inner consciousness, and the superior character of his own inward motives gave special force to his message.

Notwithstanding the prominence given to miracles in the early tradition respecting Jesus, his disciples do not seem to have thought of these as the real test of his superiority. They reported that his working of wonders was conditioned upon the proper spiritual setting: his power was grounded in a life of spiritual union with God; there was an occasion when he would not turn stones into bread, and there were times when he could not perform any miracles; but limitations of this sort were not thought to imply his inferiority on such occasions. Indeed, at just these moments of seeming failure his superiority appears most distinctly in the clarity of his spiritual vision. His right to a unique place was not conditioned by his power or lack of power to do mighty works; it was in the realm of the spiritual that he chiefly and most truly displayed his supremacy.

This picture of the historical Jesus, preserved in the memory of his disciples in spite of their efforts at theological elaboration, constitutes a substantial basis for reflection in modern times. It

is not strange that his early followers should have ultimately made him the object of their worship, or that men today should be similarly moved; but we must not lose sight of the fundamental fact that his personal religion rather than the religion about him is of fundamental importance—he lived religiously and thus inspired believers to live similarly.

What, finally, is to be the content of modern belief about this person? If one's world-view is such that special value attaches to alleged happenings lying outside the course of natural law, the terminology of the ancient faith may be retained; others may resort to the speculative notions of later times, adopting, for example, the Hegelian postulate of the divine idea, thus removing the miracle from the physical sphere into the realm of ideas; while still others may wish to level all thought of Jesus down to the ordinary plane of human experience. Perhaps one world-view is as good as another if we are careful not to obscure the real Jesus with our efforts to theologize about him. We are disposed to think it more important to seek in Jesus help for worthy living and enlightenment for our thought of God, than to try to frame an interpretation of him in the language of any predetermined metaphysical theory. Our problem is not to determine the kind of Jesus which is demanded by our ideas of God, but to attain the vision of God which our knowledge of Jesus makes possible.

From this standpoint his worth lies primarily in the content of his life, as history discloses his superior personal efficiency in the spiritual sphere. He has usually been, and one may venture to think he always will be, measured by the degree in which he aids men in their struggle for salvation; and since we may be unable now to make the external element central in our thought of salvation, some forms in which his worth was formerly phrased may have to be set aside; nevertheless the power of his personality and message continues to be a mighty inspiration prompting modern men to the worthiest spiritual attainments and encouraging them to realize in their own lives a genuine experience of God. In this respect he is now, as he always has been, the great Savior.

This spirit of his life has been felt continually and broadly wherever his memory has been preserved. The high standards of

righteousness maintained by Christians today, their emphasis upon brotherly love, the control of noble ideals in their lives, are a heritage from him. The theoretical question of whether these things would have been realized without him, however answered, does not alter the fact that thousands have found the inspiration which comes from him their mainstay in the struggles of life. Many today are repeating the experiences of the past in this respect, and even the twentieth century with all its inventive skill can scarcely hope to furnish a better agency for the propagation of righteousness and personal piety. True, Jesus was not the first to admire virtue nor the first to preach righteousness. Before his day the marble statue of goodness had been unveiled and its graceful proportions admired; but he succeeded as other artists had not in putting a throbbing heart within that marble breast, thus infusing it with the warmth of real life. He gave a personal demonstration of the possibilities of noble attainment by showing that trustful fellowship with the Father enabled one to live the life of personal purity, to maintain the optimistic spirit, to cherish the attitude of brotherly kindness and social service.

If one could peer into the secret of believers' lives from age to age perhaps he would find that much of the credit interpreters have taken to themselves for presenting Jesus effectively to men has been quite secondary in comparison with the winning power of his life. It has recently been said, speaking about the first believers, "Jesus lived on not only in the dogma but also in the ethics of his community, and their quiet walk in imitation of him had perhaps even more attracting power than the preaching about the crucified and risen one." Something of the same might be truly said of any age in the history of the faith. The power of Christianity is in its life, the lives of believers lived in likeness to and under the inspiration of the life of Jesus.

Thus understood, modern belief must center about Jesus' career as a religious personality. The divine interpreted in terms of life comes to vivid expression in his vital consciousness of unhindered fellowship with God and in his devotion to the welfare of humanity. This will mean to many persons in modern times a more significant appreciation of his worth for religious thought

than would be possible on the basis of any amount of miracle or metaphysical dualism which the oriental imagination or the ancient Greek philosophy was capable of inventing. He is no longer merely the embodiment of a metaphysical idea, a statue set on the pedestal of Jewish history and serving chiefly as an object for the obeisance of humanity; he represents deity not statically but dynamically, and so is to every age a call of God to living men. His life and his words summon all men to a service in which their supreme aim will be to learn and to do the will of God in serving their own day and generation.

We can imagine someone exclaiming, "They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him." As the women at the tomb were vainly yet anxiously seeking the living among the dead, so it frequently happens that seekers after truth experience a shock when they find their former ideas transformed into new shapes at first hardly recognizable. But if the new conserve the values of the old, the transformation may ultimately prove a blessing notwithstanding the inconvenience of a temporary disturbance of thought. The first disciples passed through dark hours of agonizing experience before their new faith in the living Lord emerged, but it proved to be a new power in their lives enabling them to retain the estimate of Jesus which their personal contact with him had inspired. Indeed, when the limitations imposed by the earthly relationship were removed the disciples were able to paint their picture of his worth with far bolder strokes than had formerly been possible. The changes in christological dogma which have come about from time to time in the history of doctrine sometimes cost believers pain, yet changes were necessary if Christian thought of Jesus was to maintain its place of supremacy.

New types of interpretation seem to have proved adequate just in so far as they preserved the vital content of the older views and at the same time answered the thought-demands of their own day. Today we recognize that the older metaphysics, in terms of which Jesus has usually been interpreted, is unsatisfactory to many persons. To meet this situation we strive to go behind all former christological theories to the historical Jesus and, with our knowledge of his life as a basis, to estimate his significance in the light

of spiritual rather than external relations. It will doubtless be conceded that this method is in harmony with certain phases of modern thought, but still it may be asked, Does it conserve those elements which made the older Christology valuable and effective?

At the basis of all past interpretation of Jesus lie two ideas to which chief worth has been attached: in him we find the ideal for human life, and we also have in him the concrete embodiment of our highest thought of God. These values have been formally expressed in the doctrine of his perfect humanity on the one hand and his absolute deity on the other. All christological speculation has described its orbit about these two foci.

No one is likely to doubt that the first of these underlying values is preserved by the modern method. Surely nothing could bring out more emphatically Jesus' worth as an ideal for our life than the effort to fix attention upon his earthly career. In fact, modern needs are not satisfied with a merely objective contemplation of his career, or a parrot-like imitation of his action; the present calls for men who have not only seen Jesus standing in a niche of the past but who see him beckoning them on to the realization of the noblest attainments in the modern world of action. For them Jesus is more than a pattern to be copied, he is a demonstration of spiritual power to be felt today by those who have received the unction of his spirit.

Can it be said that we have also conserved the second of these main values? As already indicated, the doctrinal form by which it has usually been expressed presupposes a metaphysical theory now become for many modern minds obsolete and unworkable. According to its representation, God impinged upon the universe from without, he projected himself into human history, he expressed his love for men by a semi-legal transaction making salvation possible; in short, the more external features of Jesus' career are coupled with current notions about the Deity to form a concrete setting for these notions. Thus the thought of God in his relation to the world—and this at all times is probably the most vital item of such thought—seemed more real when it could be supposed to have its personification in Jesus. Without question, this phase of Jesus' value for the religious experience of that age had to be

estimated in this currency if estimated at all; and just in so far as we today find greatest satisfaction in thinking of God in terms of externalism, shall we still need to picture Jesus in this way if he is to have worth for our thought of God.

But the converse is also true. One who feels that his most vital experience of the unseen can be adequately pictured only in terms of the spiritual will find most help for his thought of God from meditation upon the spiritual content of Jesus' life. In Jesus' loyal service for humanity one finds the incarnation of divine love; in his religious life the reality and power of spiritual communion with the unseen comes to vivid expression; both in his teaching and in his conduct the divine will for us stands out clearly; in brief, Jesus so clarifies and deepens our consciousness of spiritual realities when we come into close touch with his life that he becomes for us our most valuable aid to a better vision of God. Above all, he helps us to realize the meaning of genuine fellowship with the unseen—the most valuable relationship in terms of which our knowledge of God can be estimated. Thus we find in the life of the earthly Jesus the ideal for life today and the embodiment of those ideas which constitute our highest thought of God.